

Tuskegee Airman in Oviedo gets belated congressional honor

First Haitian pilot in program missed 2007 ceremony

By Rachael Jackson, Orlando Sentinel

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Raymond Cassagnol never set out to join the Tuskegee Airmen. He didn't plan to be the first Haitian to stand with nearly 1,000 other black pilots who helped break the U.S. military's color barrier in the sky.

Cassagnol, 89, explains the twists in his life with a Haitian saying: "What God has reserved for you, even a flood can't take it away."

Tuesday afternoon, he took his place in history as U.S. Rep. Suzanne Kosmas, D- New Smyrna Beach, presented Cassagnol with a replica of the Congressional Gold Medal, a belated award that he missed when his fellow pilots were honored in 2007 by the president.

Though the Tuskegee Airmen are widely known for their historic flights during World War II, relatively little has been written about the handful of Haitians who graduated from the program. Cassagnol is thought to be the only one still alive.

"These guys just disappeared," said John Gay, who lives in Lake City and is immediate past president of the regional chapter of the Tuskegee Airmen Inc. "They fell off the radar."

Cassagnol's life has been filled with many surprises. One of the first came when as a young man he couldn't afford college and instead he applied to the Haitian military. When he showed an aptitude for working on airplanes, he was sent to Tuskegee Army Air Field in Alabama.

He first noticed segregation when he boarded a train in Miami and was directed to a car for people of color. During his training, he avoided trips to downtown Tuskegee, fearful of what would happen if he did something as minor as fail to yield to a white person on the sidewalk.

But he recalls his instructors fondly and said he was treated well during about six months of intensive training. It was routine for fuel to be cut off in the air, forcing student pilots to react to emergency conditions. Per tradition, after his first solo flight, his buddies dumped a bucket of ice water on his head.

"Your head was hot. They needed to cool it off," he explained.

After graduating in 1943, Cassagnol went back to Haiti, where he patrolled the island from the air to ward off Nazis. He left the Haitian Air Corps in 1946 and later exported lumber. When President Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier came to power, he says he got involved in the opposition.

In 2004 Cassagnol's memoir, *Memoires d'un Revolutionnaire*, was published in French.

He left Haiti with his wife, Valentine, and five children under cover of darkness. A relative dropped them off at a mountainside. They walked, carrying 6-month-old Dominique, across the border to the Dominican Republic.

Cassagnol made his way to Washington, where he briefly worked at a parking lot. But soon the family moved back to the Caribbean — this time to the island of St. Croix, where he attended baking school and opened a bakery. He later ran a bakery on Orange Blossom Trail in Orlando but moved his business to Miami where he found a larger clientele for his Caribbean breads and pastries.

Now a U.S. citizen, he and his wife live in Oviedo with their daughter, once the baby they carried across the mountains in Haiti. Cassagnol might have spent Tuesday e-mailing friends, reading and keeping up with events in Haiti had it not been for Zellie Rainey Orr, a historian for the Tuskegee Airmen Inc., a nonprofit organization.

The January earthquake in Haiti reminded Orr of its citizens who flew its planes during World War II. She devoted herself to tracking down any that still survived. She found the widow of another airman, who led her to Cassagnol. When he called, greeting her in his French island accent, she said it was surreal.

"I was moved," she said. "This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing."

Before Tuesday's ceremony, Cassagnol pinned two sets of metal wings to his jacket: one for Haiti and one for the U.S.

He stood next to a photo of himself — a handsome young man in a flight helmet with goggles atop — as more than 20 family members and other well-wishers crowded him with camera flashes and hugs. For many situations, he can come up with an appropriate Haitian saying, but this wasn't one of them.

"No words," he said.

(RICARDO RAMIREZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL / April 5, 2010)

Congresswoman Suzanne Kosmas gives Raymond Cassagnol a Tuskegee Airmen Congressional Gold Medal Replica during a ceremony at Oviedo City Hall's Council Chamber, on Tuesday, April 6, 2010. Cassagnol, 90, was with the Haitian Air Force and trained with the Tuskegee Airmen.

